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Rev. Ebenezer Burgess, D. D.

REV. EBENEZER BURGESS, D. D.

AN ADDRESS

AT THE

Two Hundred and Fiftieth Anniversary

OF THE

FIRST CHURCH IN DEDHAM,

November 18, 1888.

BY A. C. THOMPSON.

BOSTON:
BEACON PRESS: THOMAS TODD, PRINTER,
1 Somerset Street.
1888.

DR. EBENEZER BURGESS.

THE vintage of any district always takes a type from the soil that produces it. So too with character, which never fails to receive at least a tinge from environment and heredity. The Pilgrim of our Old Colony region in former days had well-defined traits and habits. He was serious, but not gloomy; prudent, but not cunning; steady, but not obstinate. His life was controlled by fixed principles and settled convictions. He might be light-hearted, but never light-minded; and while much given to reflection, he seldom wasted time or sensibility in sighing over the inevitable. There are three things, yea four, that did not greatly intimidate him — hard work, ridicule, slander, and bluster. If he lacked leisure for much polish, he wholly lacked a desire for veneering. Self-contained, he may not have shown any great amount of fire, but the Pilgrim had deep religious fervor. Well versed in hardship and endurance, he cherished kindliness toward all men. Under a slightly Spartan exterior he carried a tender, generous heart.

From such an ancestry sprang Dr. Ebenezer Burgess. His forefathers were among the original members of the church formed in Sandwich just two hundred and fifty years ago, the same year that the first church of Dedham was organized. He was born in Wareham, Plymouth County, nearly one hundred years ago (April 1, 1790). His ancestors on the father's side for five generations, as well as five brothers and four sisters with their husbands and wives, were exemplary members of the church. At the age of fifteen young Burgess became master of a grammar school in his native town. In the class of 1809 at Brown University he ranked high. He served for two years as tutor at his Alma Mater; and the government of the college sought to retain him permanently on the staff of instruction. For two years he was professor of mathematics and natural philosophy in the University of Vermont, after which he became associated with Samuel J. Mills (1817–18) in an African exploration that contemplated the establishment of the Colony and Republic of Liberia. By study at the Andover Theological Seminary, and study elsewhere afterwards, his equipment for the sacred office was above the average of New England ministers in the first half of the present century, indeed above the average for the whole two hundred and fifty years under

review today. I need not repeat that he was the seventh in a succession of able pastors who ministered to this church for a period of two centuries and a quarter.

His selection for the foreign exploratory service just referred to suggests the fact that he was in some good measure a man of affairs, and not a recluse, not a mere student. He was the first citizen of this place who, for the special benefit of those in moderate circumstances, suggested the establishment of a savings bank — a well-administered institution, of which he continued president for two-score years. In the course of his active ministry, extending to forty years, there was not, perhaps, a single Congregational church formed or house of worship built in the vicinity to which he did not contribute by personal advice and pecuniary aid. My own family now occupies a pew in the Eliot Church, Boston, which was at first owned by him. To the work of personally supplying families in Norfolk County with the Holy Scriptures he devoted no small amount of time. In various local benevolent societies, as well as some that are national, he was an active member. Upon his invitation the first temperance meeting was held in Dedham, from which resulted a temperance society. He took the lead in introducing the infant school into New England, and main-

tained a full share of interest in the public schools of the place, as well as in the more advanced education of young men and women. Within the last two days an illustration has come to my knowledge, through the kindness of a well-known native of this town and citizen of our Commonwealth — the circumstance that Dr. Burgess took him, when a lad, and two others, to Phillips Academy, Andover, whom he aided pecuniarily and by oral encouragement. And those were not the only instances of the kind.

But we have to consider Dr. Burgess not as a citizen, not as a philanthropist, so much as a minister of the glorious gospel of Jesus Christ. How did he demean himself in that spiritual office to which he was set apart among this people? His first sermon here was preached sixty-eight years ago (July 30, 1820), he being then thirty years of age; his subject, "The triumphant ending of Paul's ministry" (2 Tim. 4: 6–8). We see him move up the aisle and enter the pulpit. Our first thought is: there comes a manly man, mature, massive, more of the oak than the osier about him, with the repose of self-possession but without the tokens of self-consciousness. His countenance is strongly marked. Among rude undeveloped people, like the wild hordes of Northern Asia, for example, it is not easy to dis-

tinguish one face from another. The features of this young man in the sacred desk indicate an unmistakable individuality. Aye, the *sacred* desk. It is not a platform, still less a stage. The man whom we see enter it has no special grace of movement or elegance of manner, but dignity is stamped upon him. He is deeply reverent. Just that he continues for fifty years. His style chaste and clear, his subjects of discourse weighty and seasonable, he aimed to instruct, to edify, to rouse and impel to healthful action by a simple, sober presentation of truth. Fine things he would not say; things fantastic and sensational he could not utter. Petty artifices he scorned; no one ever charged him with pedantry. Though invited to the presidency of a New England college, though well acquainted with the Hebrew and with the classic languages, and to some extent with Arabic, French, Italian, and Spanish, it was not from the pulpit that any one learned this. Samson could kill a lion and say nothing about it. Dr. Burgess did not possess a vivid imagination, nor an inventive ingenuity, nor great fertility of illustration, but rather an equilibrium of faculties, which gave the impression that he was a dynamic man. There was a good degree of fullness yet no inflation. Brilliancy, dash, and grace did not characterize the Duke of Wellington, but the English

nation trusted and loved him. This congregation trusted Dr. Burgess. Who ever suspected him of weakness, of insincerity, of finesse?

Of his three thousand sermons, one half, arranged chronologically, have been bound in forty-two manuscript volumes of uniform size. They are in a bold, clear hand, with scarcely an erasure or interlineation. Whatever he did was done thoroughly. Even preparatory lectures are written out in full. Texts are taken from all the books of the Bible. The arrangement of thought in each discourse is always lucid and logical. In no instance — as may sometimes be said — is it a matter of indifference at which end of the sermon you begin. The movement is onward with a definite aim in view, to convince and to benefit spiritually. A good essay may be a poor sermon. Dr. Burgess' desire was evidently not to furnish a literary treat, or a moral harangue, not to commend himself so much to every man's imagination or taste, as to every man's conscience. The range of topics is very wide. The tender, the consolatory, the winning, are all along largely interspersed. Social duties and Christian virtues come to the front. Doctrinal topics are by no means wanting, and least of all are the more solemn, startling truths and facts of our holy religion left out of account — man's spiritual ruin, condemnation, desert of ever-

lasting punishment, need of a divine mediator and of regeneration. If anything in God's word is plain, these things are plain. Dr. Burgess was in the habit of quoting pertinent Bible passages, giving chapter and verse. He had not learned that individual texts are of small account, but his sermons, when not expressly quoting, yet held Holy Scripture in solution. The sterner teachings of Holy Writ were introduced only in their proper Bible proportion; but presented they were, and no man who ignores or softens them is a faithful minister of Jesus Christ. If there is any pitiable being in the pulpit, it is the man of timid neutrality concerning vital truths, the man who by silence, by platitudes, or by the sophistries of laxness, carries on a sort of intrigue with soul-destroying error. Dr. Burgess did not scold at evils nor rail at sinners. There was no unfeeling fidelity. Tenderness pervaded all treatment of awful themes. He was a practical farmer as well, and knew the value of subsoil plowing and also the impotence of raking with teeth upward. He aimed at getting a grip on the conscience. He believed that the gospel is the power of God unto salvation, but a savor of death unto death to them that believe not. It was the flock, not the fleece, he was after; not the applause, but the eternal safety of men. His manner in the pulpit corresponded, earnest but

never vociferous. It is not necessary to be impassioned in order to be impressive. He preached uniformly as if aware that the Judge of all the earth was one of his hearers.

We would keep it in mind that fidelity and not success is the gauge of merit; but Dr. Burgess was successful. Over fifty members were added to the church the first year, and five hundred and twenty-nine in the whole course of his ministry. He believed in revivals of religion, and several such seasons of special refreshing from on high occurred. The congregation increased many fold.

But we must take note of him elsewhere than in the pulpit. He did not possess great social alertness and adroitness, which, indeed, are seldom joined to strength of character. Unostentatious benignity characterized him. The sick, the afflicted, the aged, the poor, received a large share of attention, but he never seemed to dream that he was stooping. When Paul and Peter wrote letters to their flocks they put in a word for servants. Dr. Burgess was mindful of that class. Colored persons lost nothing on account of their complexion, for he recognized the divine alike, whether wrought in ebony or ivory. Children and youths were much in his thought. He held a catechetical exercise every Monday following the sacramental Sabbath, and

once a year gave a little book to each of the young people. Bible classes were maintained in this village, for young women in the afternoon and for young men in the evening; also at East Dedham and Dedham Low Plain on successive evenings once a month. The latter were more especially for the benefit of factory laborers. Storm and darkness did not deter him from these and other remote appointments. At the time of his settlement, and for some years after, the parish was territorially twice as large as at present. Formerly there were regular attendants upon worship here from Needham, West Dedham, Readville, and Roxbury, the more distant living four miles from church. All parishioners, remote or near, he aimed to visit at least once a year. Occasional neighborhood meetings were held in the outlying districts besides a regular weekly conference at the central chapel, which was sometimes a preaching service. That chapel and another at East Dedham were put up at his expense. Pains were taken to encourage the regular maintenance of morning and evening worship in all the households of his congregation, to many of which he gave Jay's Family Prayers. Repeatedly did he engage some brother minister to aid in special efforts for the spiritual good of the community, by visiting with him from house

to house, by extra religious services, and, in the time of them, by four days' meetings.

The tongue is usually for the physician an index to the condition of the body, and for us all an index to the condition of the mind. Over that member, which in so many is an unruly one, Dr. Burgess held rare control. Whoever heard him doling out rations of dubious gossip, or uttering severe things about anybody? Every man is judged in part by what he does not say and do. With all his strong convictions and strong feelings Dr. Burgess had strong self-restraint. That resulted from fixed Christian principles and from a dominant kindliness. He was considerate, very considerate of others. Charitableness toward offenders was cultivated. Without being suspicious he was cautious. Sir Joshua Reynolds says that the man who notices only the faults of other painters gets his head full of deformities, and has no ideal of beauty to paint. Dr. Burgess never cherished the habit of dwelling on blemishes. Concerning defects in the character and conduct of men he was more than is usual either silent or lenient.

Few men have entered into pastoral relations in our commonwealth under circumstances more noteworthy. There were similar cases, however. In some respects that of his neighbor and friend Dr. Codman of Dorchester was analo-

gous, whom God called to such noble service in the cause of evangelical truth. Censurable actors in those scenes have all passed from this earthly stage. Their successors would not now repeat the same transactions. The Dedham case, I need not say, was a famous case.[1] Resulting from Chief Justice Parker's decision there were severe trials here. Of course the pastor of this church felt deeply grieved, and there would have been a lack of righteousness in his soul if he had not, but there is no evidence that he cherished resentments.

Many years later came trials of a different character and from a different source. It was at a time when, along with the agitation of needed reform of sentiment and the redress of a gigantic wrong, one of those moral epidemics, which now and then sweep through a community like a

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[1] From the highest judicial seat came this decision: "The only circumstance which gives a church any legal character is its connection with some regularly constituted society;" "A church cannot subsist without some religious community to which it is attached;" "As to all civil purposes the secession of a whole church from the parish would be an extinction of the church." Hence, if a parish by even a small majority voted away one minister and voted in another, the church was powerless. It could have no legal right to its own property, but under the forms of law such property could be transferred at will to the parish. The general sentiment at the time was that this must be regarded as, what a late historian pronounced it to be, plunder, "legalized, it is true, but none the less plunder for that." By the decision of the court the records of this evangelical church, together with its furniture and funds, were assigned to the Unitarian parish.

malarial disease, prevailed. Pastor and church were denounced as pro-slavery. Liability to perverting influences is as old as Christianity itself, for Paul had occasion to write, "Oh, foolish Galatians, who hath bewitched you?" But here the pastor and great majority of the flock neither lost their heads nor their charity. Such troublous times always reveal character. Dr. Burgess was not one of your affrontable people who cannot stand the click of even unloaded muskets; he could sit still as a target. In trying circumstances it is the strongest natures that are the gentlest. There was a call here for quiet endurance. His was an anvil that would wear out a good many hammers. He cultivated the art of hoping, and would hope on persistently, though sometimes it is harder to do this under the contradiction of saints than under the contradiction of sinners. Agitated he was not; alarmed he was not. His confidence in the overruling wisdom and goodness of God was invincible. Allowing to others the same rights of opinion with himself, he was calm under detraction and opposition, but swerve he would not. He looked upward. Men who use the telescope, men who are in the habit of contemplating the distant and the vast, are generally men of quiet temperament. That was true of Encke, Bessel, and the two Herschels. It was true here.

Every minister's life is influenced by his domestic conditions, and in this respect Dr. Burgess was eminently favored. The heartiest sympathy in every good word and work reigned at home. There was a healthful and inspiriting atmosphere, a common desire to accomplish the utmost good near and afar off. Constant streams of beneficence flowed to remote places in our own land and in other lands from the coöperating heart and hand of Abigail Bromfield Phillips.

At three score and ten Dr. Burgess resigned the active duties of the pastorate. At four score he wrote thus on his last earthly birthday: "Eighty years with Bible and Sabbath, kindred and friends, a visible disciple for sixty-two years, and for so many years permitted to preach the blessed gospel. How many were those sermons, how many those public prayers! All were beset with infirmity, all were attended with guiltiness. Yet I have the testimony of my conscience that I was honest, sincere and devoted. I endeavored to preach the gospel fearless of man and in simplicity towards God." He did not dream of professional salvation, of being any the more likely to be saved for being a minister. His trust was solely in the redeeming merits of Jesus Christ. December 5, 1870, he fell asleep in Jesus.

(Nov., 1891, 20,000)

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